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ABSTRACT

When faced with having to assign a grade to a student's oral proficiency in a small group discussion, how can teachers consistently evaluate each student? Because a student's adeptness at a foreign language can vary from one ability to another, it is unfair to evaluate his or her performance solely by grammatical and lexical accuracy or by any other single factor. Responding to this problem, a new evaluation matrix was developed that includes five categories: grammar and lexicon, communicative functions, recognition and use of phrases that convey those communicative functions, contributions of relevant content, and group involvement. These categories are explained in detail, as is the evaluation matrix for grading in the context of a small group discussion. The matrix promotes intrapersonal consistency in assessing a student's performance, provides an accurate means of assessment, and indicates in which areas a student's weaknesses lie. (Contains 14 references.) (JP)

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Evaluation Criteria for Small Group Discussions

ED 362 048

While we're waiting to begin and as the last few people trickle in, I'd like to give you the first of several pages of handouts which accompany this lecture. This first handout simply gives acknowledgements and cites references for those of you who wish to pursue more information on evaluation criteria for small group discussions. It will also give you some paper on which to take notes if you so desire. (See Handout A)

I'd like to introduce my presentation by saying that successful communication in any language is more than a matter of grammar and vocabulary -- which is what my students have been taught in junior high school and senior high school. Successful communication requires sensitivity to contextual clues and involves problem perception and strategy formation. An EFL small group discussion provides students with a practical, functional means of acquiring the conversation skills needed to successfully express ideas and converse in standard spoken English -- and that, by the way, is my major objective for my Japanese students in my English conversation courses: to assist them in acquiring the skills needed to successfully express ideas and converse in standard spoken English with a variety of speakers (both native and non-native). Ofttimes, students (AND teachers) overlook the benefits and opportunities of using English to communicate with other non-native speakers.

When faced with having to assign a grade to a student's oral proficiency in a small group discussion, how can teachers consistently evaluate each student? -- especially with hundreds

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of students every semester. The evaluation matrix presented in this lecture can not only promote inTRApersonal consistency in assessing communicative competence, but can also provide an accurate means of assessment of a student's performance as well as indicate in which areas his weaknesses lie -- thereby allowing emphasis on improving those shortcomings.

In servicing the needs of a large number of students bound for three different faculties -- Economics, Pharmacy, and Medicine -- I have discovered that the diverse abilities and needs of those three groups require a practical, functional approach. Small group discussions, fortunately, are adaptable to varying abilities, and MORE IMPORTANTLY, supply the student with practice in conversation gambits which are USEABLE in a variety of situations both in and out of the classroom.

Because a student's adeptness at a foreign lang can vary from one ability to another, it is unfair to evaluate his performance SOLELY by his grammatical-and-lexical accuracy OR by any other SINGLE factor. Therefore, the evaluation matrix presented in this lecture includes 5 categories. They are 1)grammar and lexicon, 2)communicative functions, 3)recognition and use of phrases which convey those communicative functions, 4)contributions of relevant content, and 5)group involvement. Furthermore, each category has been combined with a rating scale to allow the evaluator to glance quickly through a comprehensive and relatively just marking scheme. My labels for the rating scale are very good, good, average, weak, and unacceptable. (Please notice that there is no category for "perfect.") -- even native speakers make mistakes -- as you've no doubt noticed in my speech

today.

I would now like to give my definitions and explanations of these terms on the matrix. First of all, the category of GRAMMAR AND LEXICON refers to a student's ability to manipulate these two features of the language so as to allow clear, unhindered communication. I tell my students that this category refers to "*bunpoo*" and "*goi*". I also point out that NO ONE is perfect -- which is why there is no rating scale for "Perfect", only "very Good". (You'll see that as a native speaker, I garble things at an alarming rate.)

With regards to this category, questions I (as evaluator) ask myself as I listen to and assess the ability of each participant in a small group discussion include the following:

Can I understand his ideas?

Has his meaning-or-intent been clouded or lost by his grammatical-or-lexical errors?

Is his message basically free of interference?

I listen and watch to judge if a student is saying exactly what he wants to say in the manner in which he wishes to say it. By listening and watching how MUCH and how OFTEN a student hesitates, fumbles, and/or misuses a lexical item, and by judging how SERIOUS his grammatical errors are in relation to their complexity, I can assign a mark for accuracy to each participant.

Next, let's jump down a bit and look at the category of RELEVANT CONTENT, which has the somewhat subtle job of revealing just how much work and thoughtfulness went into a stud's preparations for a small group discussion. (In order for a discussion to proceed smoothly, it must be injected with

appropriate and relevant ideas, information, details, reasons, etc.) Since the whole point of the exercise is to DISCUSS something, I listen and look to see who volunteers WHAT INFORMATION as well as TO WHAT EXTENT he supports it and others bandy it about. Many times students have great ideas, but don't quite know how to put them into smooth, standard English -- that's why there are two different categories for this situation -- one for the content (the creativity, if you will) and another for the grammatical-and-lexical manipulations.

Now, let's go on to the categories of USE OF PHRASES and COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS. Let's think about COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS for a moment or two. English -- any language, in fact -- has the capability of expressing HUNDREDS of functions, with THOUSANDS of nuances. BUt that's far too overwhelming to begin with in an EFL conversation class. I've winnowed the major functions down to about 25 or 26. High on the list is the function of "GIVING AN OPINION" -- Can anyone think of an English expression for the function of "GIVING AN OPINION"? What do we say in English when we wish to express our opinions? . . . .

Another function I emphasize is "SEEKING CLARIFICATION". Non-linguistically, my students are VERY adept at saying "Huh?" and looking blank. (It's virtually an art form with them.) But I teach them the phrases "What do you mean?" and "Sorry, I don't quite follow." to linguistically convey the function of "Huh?" for "SEEKING CLARIFICATION".

Another function which I feel is important in a small group discussion is that of INTERRUPTING. How do we interrupt -- linguistically -- in English? . . . . . .

USE OF PHRASES is a category which intersects the "COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS" category in that these PHRASES represent a few ways to appropriately convey the functions which are necessary for communicative interaction. By necessity, these phrases must be taught (although many are already known) and these phrases must be practiced before their use can be evaluated in small group discussions. (These phrases have the added benefit of being useable in other circumstances as well, both in the classroom and out in the real world.)

At this time I'd like to distribute the next two hand-outs, which deal with these two categories: USE OF PHRASES and COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS. (See Handouts B and C 1-2)

As you can see, the COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS covered by these PHRASES include such functions as ..... I have listed here 26 functions, but you can delete some or add others if you wish. (Those you might wish to add could be "expressing gratitude" or "citing examples".) In my classroom, my students and I have several -- sometimes many -- example phrases for these 26 communicative functions. On your hand-out of EXAMPLE PHRASES, I have listed just one example phrase for each communicative function. There are MANY others. I suggest that you use what comes naturally to you and your students -- as long as it's acceptable English.

In assigning a mark for USE OF PHRASES on the evaluation matrix, I listen for and actually COUNT how many phrases the students use correctly in a small group discussion. We'll look at this more closely when we get to the completed matrix handout.

You can see that the categories of COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS

COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS

Introducing the Subject for Discussion
Keeping the Discussion Moving
Closing the Discussion

Giving an Opinion
Inquiring about Agreement/Disagreement
Expressing Agreement
Expressing Disagreement
Expressing Doubt/Reservation

Getting Further Information
Seeking Clarification

Restating Your Own Ideas
Paraphrasing Another Person's Ideas

Interrupting
Getting a Point into the Discussion

Bringing in Other People
Requesting

Making Suggestions
Agreeing with a Suggestion/Request
Refusing a Suggestion/Request

Making Comparisons
Expressing Similarities
Expressing Preference

Dismissing an Irrelevant Point
Persuading/Convincing
Refuting a Fact
Capitulation

HANDOUT B

EXAMPLE PHRASES FOR COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS

(Introducing the Subject for Discussion)
"We're here today to discuss blah, blah, blah ."

(Keeping the Discussion Moving)
"Let's go on to another point."

(Closing the Discussion)
"In conclusion, the purpose of this discussion was to blah, blah, blah ."

(Giving an Opinion)
"In my opinion, blah, blah, blah ."

(Inquiring about Agreement/Disagreement)
"Don't you agree, Miss Tanaka?"

(Expressing Agreement)
"Yes, that's right."

(Expressing Disagreement)
"I don't really agree with you, Mr.Ito."

(Expressing Doubt/Reservation)
"Well,...maybe...,but I'm doubtful."

(Getting Further Information)
"Would you mind explaining that a little more, please?"

(Seeking Clarification)
"What do you mean?"

(Restating Your Own Ideas)
"In other words, blah, blah, blah ."

(Paraphrasing Another Person's Ideas)
"What Mr.Takai means is that blah, blah, blah ."

(Interrupting)
"Excuse me for interrupting, but blah, blah, blah ."

(Getting a Point into the Discussion)
"I have a point I'd like to make."

HANDOUT C1-2

(over)

(Bringing in Other People)
"What do you think about Miss Sugimoto's idea, Mr.Hanada?"

(Requesting)
"Mr.Nakano, I wonder if you would blah, blah, blah , please?"

(Making Suggestions)
"I suggest that blah, blah, blah ."

(Agreeing with a Suggestion/Request)
"Certainly."

(Refusing a Suggestion/Request)
"Unfortunately, that's not possible."

(Making Comparisons)
"Mr.Ogawa's suggestion is more practical than yours."

(Rxpressing Similarities)
"Those two points are about the same."

(Expressing Preference)
"I think the best idea is blah, blah, blah ."

(Dismissing an Irrelevant Point)
"Mr.Hara, I'm afraid you're missing the point."

(Persuading/Convincing)
"You must admit that blah, blah, blah ."

(Refuting a Fact)
"Actually, blah, blah, blah ."

(Capitulation)
"Well, Miss Ishikawa has persuaded me that blah, blah, blah , so I have changed my mind and now agree with her."

HANDOUT C1-2

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Small Group Discussions: Evaluation Criteria
April 17, 1993 TESOL '93 Conference, Atlanta

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and USE OF PHRASES are somewhat -- but not completely -- dependent on each other. The COMM FUNCT category refers to the success a student has NOT in simply saying a phrase, but in recognizing and performing various communicative functions. This functional aspect of language -- recognizing when a situation calls for a particular type of response and supplying it appropriately -- is an integral part of language proficiency. A student's communicative competence can be indicated by the type of functions he can utilize -- that is, the functions which he can recognize and to which he can appropriately respond. This differs from simply being able to correctly say a phrase -- and that is why these categories are evaluated separately.

EXAMPLE: For the COMM FUNCT of "INTERRUPTING", we have the phrase "Excuse me for interrupting." A student may be able to say this phrase flawlessly, but what if he uses it when no one else is talking?..... For the COMM FUNCT of "GETTING FURTHER INFO", we have the phrase "Would you explain that more fully, please?" The implication is that the student understands the speaker's point and would like MORE info. But what if there is no comprehension at all? (Remember that blank look accompanied by "Huh?") The student should have used SEEKING CLARIFICATION "What do you mean?"

The last category, INVOLVEMENT, is not based on using any particular linguistic skill, but simply upon two things: 1)being aware of what's going on in the discussion, and 2)acting upon it. I take into account how frequently a student initiates a point in the discussion, how actively he responds to others, and how reliant he may be on others to carry the bulk of the discussion.

Both categories of COMM FUNCTS and INVOLVEMENT entail the receptive skill of listening comprehension as well as the productive skill of speaking. Small group discussions require more than oral production (on which "grammar-and-lexicon" and "use-of-phrases" are solely focused) -- small group discussions require actual communication. Having these two categories, COMM FUNCTS and INVOL, assures that the students will be evaluated on their total communicative competence, not simply on their ability to produce a complete understandable sentence.

Along these same lines of what constitutes "real" communication, I try to avoid putting students into a situation in which they can make a SCRIPT of the discussion, memorize it, and then throw it back up to me during our discussion session. SCRIPTING negates any active communication, so I make sure that the students who were in the same group for the practice discussions are NOT in the same group for the actual GRADED discussion, (and I KEEP mixing them up in other groups for every practice session and for every graded discussion). It only takes once for my students to realize what's going on and what purpose it serves.

Now let's look at the rating scale of this evaluation matrix. Here is the last handout for you -- the completed evaluation matrix. (See Handout D)

[PRE-SUMMARY] In evaluating EFL learners by these five categories, I have found it to be the rule rather than the exception that a student's abilities vary from category to category. It is not unusual for a student to have many grammatical errors; however, the same student -- in the same

20 points/(100%) - 17 points/(85%) : A
16 points/(80%) - 15 points/(75%) : B
14 points/(70%) - 11 points/(55%) : C
10 points/(50%) - 0 points/(0%) : F

GROUP DISCUSSION GRADING CRITERIA

	Very Good 4	Good 3	Average 2	Weak 1	Unacceptable 0
GRAMMAR AND LEXICON	minimal errors allow accurate communication	noticeable errors do not interfere with message	adequate communication even with many errors	severe problems interfere with communication	extreme problems block communication OR says almost nothing
COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS	efficiently and appropriately uses a wide variety of functions (e.g., paraphrasing, persuading, refuting, comparing, evaluating)	appropriately uses different functions (e.g., restating, interrupting, requesting, suggesting, capitulation)	appropriately asks questions, brings others into the discussion	responds by agreeing, disagreeing, answering questions, giving opinions	expresses almost no functions
USE OF PHRASES	appropriate use of a wide variety of phrases (26 - 17)	appropriate use of many different phrases (16 - 13)	appropriate use of several different phrases (12 - 9)	very limited use of phrases (8 - 4)	almost no use of phrases (3 - 0)
RELEVANT CONTENT	contributes useful ideas/new information; strong support with relevant reasons, details, examples	contributes good ideas; good support	contributes ideas which reflect basic understanding of topic; adequate support (perhaps vague)	contributes ideas with limited/minimal support	fails to contribute meaningful ideas to the discussion; inappropriate contributions
INVOLVEMENT	completely involved in the discussion	takes an active role in the discussion	participates but relies on others to take the initiative OR monopolizes/conducts the discussion	responds passively	isn't involved in the discussion to any real degree

HANDOUT D

discussion -- may have prepared his ideas carefully and therefore could quite possibly contribute a substantial number of useful ideas or new information with strong support using relevant reasons, details, examples, etc.

In such instances, which are by no means uncommon, it would be unfair to evaluate the student's performance in the discussion SOLELY by his grammatical-and-lexical accuracy OR by the thoroughness of his preparation OR by any other SINGLE factor. Therefore, each of these five categories has been combined with a rating scale to produce a chart with fairly short descriptions -- thus enabling the examiner to glance quickly through the marking scheme. This evaluation matrix promotes inTRApersonal consistency in assessing a student's performance; it provides an ACCURATE means of assessment; and it indicates in WHICH areas a stud's weaknesses lie -- thereby allowing emphasis on improvement.

At the university where I teach, I use a 4-to-zero point rating scale -- with 4 corresponding to "very good" usage-or-performance, 3 "good", 2 "average", 1 "weak", and Zero "unacceptable". As I said earlier, NO ONE is perfect -- not even a native speaker teacher -- as you have noticed numerous times already. When placed within this framework, the evaluation of a student's oral proficiency (or communicative competence) can range from 20 to zero. This not only provides an ACCURATE means of assessment, but by describing the performance of each category at each level on the rating scale, this matrix also helps the assessor CONSISTENTLY evaluate each small group discussion participant. And by having four or five or six students in one

small group discussion, the time it takes to evaluate each student is cut down. Instead of spending 15 minutes evaluating ONE student, a small group discussion involves 15 minutes of evaluation for four or five or six students -- however many you'd like to put in a group. This is particularly useful for EFL teachers who are faced with hundreds of conversation students every semester.

Finally, in accordance with the final-grade schema at my university, I arrange these 20 points into a point-percentage-grade breakdown (shown in the upper left hand corner of Handout D).

Since students appreciate knowing how their grades are determined, I distribute copies of this matrix to them, explain it, and discuss the point-percentage-grade breakdown. Moreover, after every graded discussion, I give them their graded evaluation matrix sheets so that they can compare their most recent evaluation with the ones that have gone before. It's an effective way of showing them where their weaknesses lie and where to focus on improving their scores -- which are reflective of their oral proficiency.

[CONCLUSION] For my final comments, I would like to say that there are several conditions that promote language learning -- among them NEED, MOTIVATION, and OPPORTUNITIES to practice and use the language. Small group discussions provide these things.

Furthermore, successful communication in the real world involves more than grammar-and-vocabulary; it requires sensitivity to contextual clues; it involves problem perception and strategy formation; and it necessitates involvement. Small

group discussions furnish these things, too.

Given the less-than-optimal time required from students for English conversation, it is imperative that students AND teachers efficiently utilize this limited time for maximum benefit and learning, and appropriately use well-chosen evaluation criteria. In my opinion, small group discussions and the evaluation criteria presented in this lecture satisfy those demands.

Thank you for your attention.

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HANDOUT A